<u>WHAT IS CLAIMED IS</u>:

1. In a network-based e-commerce environment, including a plurality of network-connected e-commerce sites accessible by a plurality of network-connected users, a method of tracking selected referrals, comprising:

enrolling at least two e-commerce sites in a merchant network;

providing a first navigational link that allows network-connected users to reach a first one of the e-commerce sites that have enrolled in said merchant network;

providing a second navigational link that allows network-connected users to navigate from said first one of said e-commerce sites to a second one of the e-commerce sites that have enrolled in said merchant network; and,

compensating entities associated with said first and second navigational links when a network-connected user utilizes said first navigational link to reach said first e-commerce site, utilizes said second navigational link to reach said second e-commerce site and completes a commercial transaction at said

second e-commerce site.

2.   In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 1, wherein:

compensating entities associated with said first and second navigational links comprises splitting a referral commission associated with said commercial transaction between said entities associated with said first and second navigational links.

3.   In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 1, wherein:

compensating entities associated with said first and second navigational links comprises assigning equal portions of a referral commission associated with said commercial transaction to each of said entities associated with said first and second navigational links.

4.   In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 1, wherein:

compensating entities associated with said first and

second navigational links comprises assigning a
majority portion of a referral commission associated
with said commercial transaction to said entity
associated with said first navigational link, and
assigning a minority portion of said referral
commission to said entity associated with said
second navigational link.

5.   In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method
of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 1,
wherein:

compensating entities associated with said first and
second navigational links comprises assigning a
minority portion of a referral commission associated
with said commercial transaction to said entity
associated with said first navigational link, and
assigning a majority portion of said referral
commission to said entity associated with said
second navigational link.

6.   In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method
of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 1, further
comprising:

compensating only an entity associated with said first

navigational link when a network-connected user

utilizes said first navigational link to reach said

first e-commerce site and completes a commercial

transaction at said first e-commerce site.

7.   In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method

of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 6, further

comprising:

compensating only an entity associated with said second

navigational link when a network-connected user

utilizes said second navigational link to reach said

second e-commerce site and completes a commercial

transaction at said second e-commerce site.

8.   In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method

of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 1, further

comprising:

compensating only an entity associated with said second

navigational link when a network-connected user

utilizes said second navigational link to reach said

second e-commerce site and completes a commercial

transaction at said second e-commerce site.

9.   In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method

of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 1, further
comprising:

    providing a third navigational link that allows network-
        connected users to navigate from said second one of
        said e-commerce sites to a third one of the e-
        commerce sites that have enrolled in said merchant
        network; and,

    compensating entities associated with said first, second
        and third navigational links when a network-
        connected user utilizes said first navigational link
        to reach said first e-commerce site, utilizes said
        second navigational link to reach said second e-
        commerce site, utilizes said third navigational link
        to reach said third e-commerce site and completes a
        commercial transaction at said third e-commerce
        site.

    10. In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method
of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 9,
wherein:

    compensating entities associated with said first, second
        and third navigational links comprises assigning

equal portions of a referral commission associated

with said commercial transaction completed at said

third e-commerce site to each of said entities

associated with said first, second and third

navigational links.

11. In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method

of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 9,

wherein:

compensating entities associated with said first, second

and third navigational links comprises assigning a

majority portion of a referral commission associated

with said commercial transaction completed at said

third e-commerce site to said entities associated

with said second and/or third navigational links.

12. In a network-based e-commerce environment, a method

of tracking selected referrals, as defined in claim 9,

wherein:

compensating entities associated with said first, second

and third navigational links comprises assigning a

majority portion of a referral commission associated

with said commercial transaction completed at said

third e-commerce site to said entity associated with

said third navigational link.

13. A method of compensating sources who refer network-connected users to, and among, a group of e-commerce merchants, said method comprising:

providing a plurality of network-accessible primary referral links configured to direct network-connected users from a source outside said group of e-commerce merchants to selected ones of said e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants;

providing a plurality of network-accessible secondary referral links configured to direct network-connected users from e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants to other e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants;

compensating a primary referral source in response to completion of an e-commerce transaction at one of the e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants, where the user who completed said transaction was referred to said e-commerce merchant by a referral link provided by said primary referral source;

compensating primary and secondary referral sources in

response to completion of an e-commerce transaction

at one of the e-commerce merchants in said group of

e-commerce merchants, where the user who completed

said transaction was referred to said secondary

referral source by a referral provided by said

primary referral source, and said user was referred

to said e-commerce merchant by a referral link

provided by said secondary referral source.

14. A method of compensating sources who refer network-
connected users to, and among, a group of e-commerce
merchants', as described in claim 13, wherein:

compensating primary and secondary referral sources

comprises assigning equal shares of a commission

associated with the completion of said e-commerce

transaction to said primary and secondary referral

sources.

15. A method of compensating sources who refer network-
connected users to, and among, a group of e-commerce
merchants, as described in claim 13, wherein:

compensating primary and secondary referral . sources

comprises assigning a majority portion of a

commission associated with the completion of said e-commerce transaction to said primary referral source and assigning a minority portion of said commission to said secondary referral source.

16. A method of compensating sources who refer network-connected users to, and among, a group of e-commerce merchants, as described in claim 13, wherein:

compensating primary and secondary referral sources comprises assigning a majority portion of a commission associated with the completion of said e-commerce transaction to said secondary referral source and assigning a minority portion of said commission to said primary referral source.

17. A method of tracking commissions earned by primary referrals to, and secondary referrals among, a group of e-commerce merchants, said method comprising:

providing a plurality of network-accessible primary referral links configured to direct network-connected users from a source outside said group of e-commerce merchants to selected ones of said e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants, each of said primary referral links

including a primary referral source identifier that

identifies the source of said primary referral link;

providing a plurality of network-accessible secondary

referral links configured to direct network-

connected users from e-commerce merchants in said

group of e-commerce merchants to other e-commerce

merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants,

each of said secondary referral links including a

secondary referral source identifier that identifies

the source of said secondary referral link; and,

in response to a network-connected user's engagement of

a secondary referral link to navigate from a first

e-commerce merchant in said group of e-commerce

merchants to second e-commerce merchant in said

group of e-commerce merchants, storing primary and

secondary source identifiers associated with any

primary and secondary referral links utilized by

said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant.

18. A method of tracking commissions earned by primary

referrals to, and secondary referrals among, a group of e-

commerce merchants, as defined in claim 17, wherein:

storing primary and secondary source identifiers

associated with any primary and secondary referral links utilized by said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant includes embedding primary and secondary source identifiers associated with any primary and secondary referral links utilized by said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant in a navigational link utilized to direct said user to said second e-commerce merchant.

19. A method of tracking commissions earned by primary referrals to, and secondary referrals among, a group of e-commerce merchants, as defined in claim 17, wherein:

storing primary and secondary source identifiers associated with any primary and secondary referral links utilized by said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant includes directing the user from said first e-commerce merchant to said second e-commerce merchant through a clearinghouse server and storing, at said clearinghouse server, primary and secondary source identifiers associated with any primary and secondary referral links utilized by said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant.

20. A method of tracking commissions earned by primary

referrals to, and secondary referrals among, a group of e-commerce merchants, as defined in claim 17, wherein:

storing primary and secondary source identifiers associated with any primary and secondary referral links utilized by said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant includes sending a message to a clearinghouse server containing the primary and secondary source identifiers associated with any primary and secondary referral links utilized by said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant.

21. A method for permitting an e-commerce merchant, in a group of e-commerce merchants, to earn commissions by referring customers to other merchant(s) in said group of e-commerce merchants, said method comprising:

permitting a user to select product(s) and/or service(s) for purchase at said e-commerce merchant's site;

in response to the user's selection(s) of product(s) and/or service(s), referring said user to another e-commerce merchant in said group of e-commerce merchants;

in response to said user's purchase of product(s) and/or service(s) from said another e-commerce merchant,

selectively assigning a commission associated with said purchase as follows:

all of said commission to said e-commerce merchant who referred said user to said another e-commerce merchant, if said e-commerce merchant would not owe commissions to a any referring entity(ies) for purchases made by said user from said e-commerce merchant; or,

if said e-commerce merchant would owe commissions to one or more referring entity(ies) for purchases made by said user from said e-commerce merchant, part of said commission to said e-commerce merchant, and part of said commission to one or more of said one or more referring entity(ies).

22. A method for permitting an e-commerce merchant to earn commissions by referring customers to other merchant(s), as defined in claim 21, wherein:

assigning part of said commission associated with said purchase to said e-commerce merchant and part of said commission to one or more of said referring

entity(ies) comprises assigning a majority of said commission to said e-commerce merchant.

23. A method for permitting an e-commerce merchant to earn commissions by referring customers to other merchant(s), as defined in claim 21, wherein:

assigning part of said commission associated with said purchase to said e-commerce merchant and part of said commission to one or more of said referring entity(ies) comprises assigning a majority of said commission to one or more of said referring entity(ies).

24. A network-based e-commerce environment, comprising:

a network-accessible merchant enrollment processing module configured to enroll e-commerce merchants in a merchant network through an automated, on-line process;

a network-accessible affiliate enrollment processing module configured to enroll affiliates through an automated, on-line process, thereby enabling enrolled affiliates to provide primary referral links to enrolled e-commerce merchants;

a commission processing module, configured to:

assign compensation to an affiliate in response

to (i) a network-connected user's use of a

primary referral link provided by said

affiliate to reach an enrolled e-commerce

merchant and (ii) said user's completion of

a transaction with said e-commerce

merchant;

assign compensation to both an affiliate and an

enrolled e-commerce merchant in response to

(i) a network-connected users use of a

primary referral link provided by said

affiliate to reach said enrolled e-commerce

merchant, (ii) said user's use of a

secondary referral link provided by said e-

commerce merchant to reach another enrolled

e-commerce merchant and (iii) said user's

completion of a transaction with said

another e-commerce merchant.

25. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined

in claim 24, wherein:

said merchant enrollment processing module includes a

merchant identification module that assigns a unique

merchant identifier to each newly enrolled merchant.

26. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined in claim 24, wherein:

said merchant enrollment processing module includes a merchant software stub installation module that provides tracking software for installation at enrolled e-commerce merchants.

27. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined in claim 24, wherein:

said affiliate enrollment processing module includes an affiliate identification module that assigns a unique affiliate identifier to each newly enrolled affiliate.

28. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined in claim 27, wherein:

said primary referral links each include an affiliate identifier.

29. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined in claim 24, wherein:

said commission processing module is hosted by a network-connected clearinghouse server, separate from said enrolled e-commerce merchants.

30. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined in claim 29, wherein:

said enrollment processing modules are also hosted by said clearinghouse server.

31. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined in claim 24, wherein:

the commission processing module is further configured to assign compensation to both the affiliate and the enrolled e-commerce merchant by splitting between said affiliate and enrolled merchant a commission equal to that which the affiliate would receive for referring said user directly to said another e-commerce merchant.

32. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined in claim 31, wherein:

said commission processing module is hosted by a network-connected clearinghouse server, separate from any of the affiliates or e-commerce merchants.

33. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined in claim 31, wherein:

said commission splitting assigns equal shares of said

split commission to said affiliate and said enrolled

e-commerce merchant.

34. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined

in claim 31, wherein:

said commission splitting assigns a majority share of

said split commission to said affiliate and a

minority share of said split commission to said

enrolled e-commerce merchant.

35. A network-based e-commerce environment, as defined

in claim 31, wherein:

said commission splitting assigns a minority share of

said split commission to said affiliate and a

majority share of said split commission to said

enrolled e-commerce merchant.

36. A network-based system for compensating sources who

refer network-connected users to, and among, a group of e-

commerce merchants, said system comprising:

a plurality of network-accessible primary referral links

configured to direct network-connected users from a

source outside said group of e-commerce merchants to

selected ones of said e-commerce merchants in said

group of e-commerce merchants;

a plurality of network-accessible secondary referral links configured to direct network-connected users from e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants to other e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants;

means for compensating a primary referral source in response to completion of an e-commerce transaction at one of the e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants, where the user who completed said transaction was referred to said e-commerce merchant by a referral link provided by said primary referral source; and,

means for compensating primary and secondary referral sources in response to completion of an e-commerce transaction at one of the e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants, where the user who completed said transaction was referred to said secondary referral source by a referral provided by said primary referral source, and said user was referred to said e-commerce merchant by a referral link provided by said secondary referral source.

37. A system for compensating sources who refer network-connected users to, and among, a group of e-commerce merchants, as described in claim 36, wherein:

said means for compensating primary and secondary referral sources includes means for assigning equal shares of a commission associated with the completion of said e-commerce transaction to said primary and secondary referral sources.

38. A system for compensating sources who refer network-connected users to, and among, a group of e-commerce merchants, as described in claim 36, wherein:

said means for compensating primary and secondary referral sources includes means for assigning a majority portion of a commission associated with the completion of said e-commerce transaction to said primary referral source and assigning a minority portion of said commission to said secondary referral source.

39. A system for compensating sources who refer network-connected users to, and among, a group of e-commerce merchants, as described in claim 36, wherein:

said means for compensating primary and secondary

referral sources includes means for assigning a majority portion of a commission associated with the completion of said e-commerce transaction to said secondary referral source and assigning a minority portion of said commission to said primary referral source.

40. A system for tracking commissions earned by primary referrals to, and secondary referrals among, a group of e-commerce merchants, said method comprising:

a plurality of network-accessible primary referral links configured to direct network-connected users from a source outside said group of e-commerce merchants to selected ones of said e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants, each of said primary referral links including a primary referral source identifier that identifies the source of said primary referral link;

a plurality of network-accessible secondary referral links configured to direct network-connected users from e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants to other e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants, each of said

secondary referral links including a secondary
referral source identifier that identifies the
source of said secondary referral link; and,

a secondary referral processing module, responsive to a
network-connected user's engagement of a secondary
referral link to navigate from a first e-commerce
merchant in said group of e-commerce merchants to
second e-commerce merchant in said group of e-
commerce merchants, and configured to store primary
and secondary source identifiers associated with any
primary and secondary referral links utilized by
said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant.

41. A system for tracking commissions earned by primary
referrals to, and secondary referrals among, a group of e-
commerce merchants, as defined in claim 40, wherein:

said secondary referral processing module embeds primary
and secondary source identifiers associated with any
primary and secondary referral links utilized by
said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant in
a navigational link utilized to direct said user to
said second e-commerce merchant.

42. A system for tracking commissions earned by primary referrals to, and secondary referrals among, a group of e-commerce merchants, as defined in claim 40, wherein:

said secondary referral processing module directs the user from said first e-commerce merchant to said second e-commerce merchant through a clearinghouse server and stores, at said clearinghouse server, primary and secondary source identifiers associated with any primary and secondary referral links utilized by said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant.

43. A system for tracking commissions earned by primary referrals to, and secondary referrals among, a group of e-commerce merchants, as defined in claim 40, wherein:

said secondary referral processing module sends a message to a clearinghouse server containing the primary and secondary source identifiers associated with any primary and secondary referral links utilized by said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant.

44. A system for permitting an e-commerce merchant, in a group of e-commerce merchants, to earn commissions by referring customers to other merchant(s) in said group of e-

commerce merchants, said method comprising:

a catalog processing module that allows a user to select product(s) and/or service(s) for purchase at said e-commerce merchant's site;

a secondary referral module, responsive to the user's selection(s) of product(s) and/or service(s), and configured to refer said user to another e-commerce merchant in said group of e-commerce merchants;

a commission processing module, responsive to said user's purchase of product(s) and/or service(s) from said another e-commerce merchant, and configured to selectively assign a commission associated with said purchase as follows:

all of said commission to said e-commerce merchant who referred said user to said another e-commerce merchant, if said e-commerce merchant would not owe commissions to a any referring entity(ies) for purchases made by said user from said e-commerce merchant; or,

if said e-commerce merchant would owe commissions to one or more referring

entity(ies) for purchases made by said user
from said e-commerce merchant, part of said
commission to said e-commerce merchant, and
part of said commission to one or more of
said one or more referring entity(ies).

45. A system for permitting an e-commerce merchant to
earn commissions by referring customers to other merchant(s),
as defined in claim 44, wherein:

assigning part of said commission associated with said
purchase to said e-commerce merchant and part of
said commission to one or more of said referring
entity(ies) comprises assigning a majority of said
commission to said e-commerce merchant.

46. A system for permitting an e-commerce merchant to
earn commissions by referring customers to other merchant(s),
as defined in claim 44, wherein:

assigning part of said commission associated with said
purchase to said e-commerce merchant and part of
said commission to one or more of said referring
entity(ies) comprises assigning a majority of said
commission to one or more of said referring
entity(ies).

47. Articles-of-manufacture for use in a network-based e-commerce environment which includes a merchant network of at least two network-connected e-commerce merchants, said articles-of-manufacture comprising computer-readable media containing instructions which, when executed, cause one or more network-connected computers to:

provide a first navigational link that allows network-connected users to reach a first one of the e-commerce sites in said merchant network;

provide a second navigational link that allows network-connected users to navigate from said first one of said e-commerce sites to a second one of the e-commerce sites in said merchant network; and,

compensate entities associated with said first and second navigational links when a network-connected user utilizes said first navigational link to reach said first e-commerce site, utilizes said second navigational link to reach said second e-commerce site and completes a commercial transaction at said second e-commerce site.

48. Articles-of-manufacture for use in a network-based e-commerce environment which includes a group of at least two

network-connected e-commerce merchants, said articles-of-manufacture comprising computer-readable media containing instructions which, when executed, cause one or more network-connected computers to:

provide a plurality of network-accessible primary referral links configured to direct network-connected users from a source outside said group of e-commerce merchants to selected ones of said e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants, each of said primary referral links including a primary referral source identifier that identifies the source of said primary referral link;

provide a plurality of network-accessible secondary referral links configured to direct network-connected users from e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants to other e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants, each of said secondary referral links including a secondary referral source identifier that identifies the source of said secondary referral link; and,

in response to a network-connected user's engagement of a secondary referral link to navigate from a first

e-commerce merchant in said group of e-commerce merchants to second e-commerce merchant in said group of e-commerce merchants, storing primary and secondary source identifiers associated with any primary and secondary referral links utilized by said user to reach said first e-commerce merchant.

49. Articles-of-manufacture for use in a network-based e-commerce environment which includes a group of at least two network-connected e-commerce merchants, said articles-of-manufacture comprising computer-readable media containing instructions which, when executed, cause one or more network-connected computers to:

provide a plurality of network-accessible primary referral links configured to direct network-connected users from a source outside said group of e-commerce merchants to selected ones of said e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants;

provide a plurality of network-accessible secondary referral links configured to direct network-connected users from e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants to other e-commerce

merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants;

compensate a primary referral source in response to completion of an e-commerce transaction at one of the e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants, where the user who completed said transaction was referred to said e-commerce merchant by a referral link provided by said primary referral source; and,

compensate primary and secondary referral sources in response to completion of an e-commerce transaction at one of the e-commerce merchants in said group of e-commerce merchants, where the user who completed said transaction was referred to said secondary referral source by a referral provided by said primary referral source, and said user was referred to said e-commerce merchant by a referral link provided by said secondary referral source.